DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 479 190 PS 031 439

AUTHOR	Parker, Judith A.
TITLE	Helping Children in Times of Need: Grief, Loss, Separation & Divorce. A Handbook for Parents Assisting Children through Grief and Loss.
INSTITUTION	Australian Early Childhood Association, Inc., Watson.
ISBN	ISBN-1-875890-62-9
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	33p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Early Childhood Australia, Inc., P.O. Box 105, Watson, ACT 2602, Australia. Tel: (02)-6241-6900; Fax: (02)-6241-5547; e-mail: publishing@aeca.org.au; Web site: http://www.aeca.org.au.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	Bereavement; *Children; *Coping; Crisis Management; *Death; Definitions; *Divorce; Emotional Response; Family Relationship; *Grief; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Materials; Parent Responsibility; Parent Role; Pets; Refugees; Relocation; Siblings; Significant Others
IDENTIFIERS	*Loss; Marital Separation; Separation (Psychology)

ABSTRACT

Although a world of uncertainty and continual change is difficult to explain to children, by exploring and discussing the process of grief, parents can begin to understand the significance and necessity of the grief process and help their children to cope with difficult events. This booklet offers parents advice on how to talk with children about difficult events, including the death of a family member, significant adult, or a pet; moving from home or to a different school; marital separation and divorce; and issues faced by displaced and refugee children. The booklet differentiates loss, grief, and bereavement, and describes possible immediate and later reactions to loss, emphasizing that extreme loss is a family crisis and that young children may not understand that a loss is final. Parents are encouraged to use clear language explaining the loss event and cultural practices around it to avoid confusion, fear, or guilt in the child. The importance of expressing feelings and talking about the loss at home is emphasized. The booklet describes the predictable and normal reactions to a loss through death for children from birth to 12 years as well as the stages of parent and child change following a marital separation. Throughout the booklet, various observations and stories illustrate ways to help children cope with loss. The booklet emphasizes that at times of crisis, it is essential that parents be aware that grief is normal, provide consistency of relationships at home, be sensitive to moods within the family, be prepared for crisis, be patient with the grief process, and confident in their abilities to provide a loving, secure environment for their children. The booklet concludes with a list of contacts in Australia for additional assistance for parents, and a list of books for children. (Contains a 10-item bibliography.) (KB)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 479 190

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Wendy Sanderson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
2B

PS 031439

Helping children in times of need

GRIEF, LOSS, SEPARATION & DIVORCE

A handbook for parents assisting children through grief and loss

Judith A Parker

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

AECA ... *voice for young children*

Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.

Helping children in times of need

GRIEF, LOSS, SEPARATION & DIVORCE

A handbook for parents assisting children through grief and loss

Judith A Parker

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judith Parker is an early childhood special education educator. Her qualifications are Early Childhood Teaching (MKTC), Post Graduate Diploma in Special Education majoring in Learning Disabilities and a Post Graduate Diploma in Community Counselling with majors in Family Therapy and Grief and Loss Counselling (Canberra University). She has recently retired from a teaching career in Canberra and Western Australia and has a long involvement in community activities. She is an advocate for children's rights through her commitment to the Australian Early Childhood Association (AECA), Canberra Mother Craft Society, Canberra Preschool Society, Specific Learning Difficulties Association (SPELD), National Association of Grief and Loss and as the WA Representative to the World Early Childhood Association Australian Chapter.

Judith is currently President of the National Council of Women of Australia.

About AECA

The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA) actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children from birth to eight years and their families, and supports the important role of parents. AECA is also the national umbrella organisation for children's services.

AECA is a leading specialist publisher of early childhood literature.

Special Titles Editor

Penelope Craswell

Publications Officer

Terri-Anne Simmonds

Photos

Barry Brown, Rhonda Milner, Louise Tigchelaar and thanks to George Parker, the Bredhauer family, the Buetthkoffer family and to all others who appear in the photographs.

Contact Details

Publications Section
Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
PO Box 105 Watson ACT 2602
Tel: (02) 6241 6900 Fax (02) 6241 5547
Email: publishing@aeca.org.au

© Copyright 2003

All rights reserved by the Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
Material herein must not be reproduced in any form without permission of the Association.

ISBN 1 875890 62 9

Printed by National Capital Printing, Canberra
Designed by Giraffe vcm

5

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Understanding Grief and Loss	1
Predictable and normal reactions of a child to loss	3
The language of grief and loss	5
Cultural influences on grief	5
Death	6
When a sibling dies	9
Death of a significant adult	11
Suicide	12
Loss of a pet	12
Changing lifestyles: Moving house, school	13
Separation and divorce	15
Displaced and refugee children	20
The responsibility of parents	20
Books for children	23
Bibliography	24

Dedication: This book is dedicated to Jacqueline and Natasha. May you live in peace.

Note from the author: The observations and stories used in this publication are true life observations and stories. Names and places have been changed to protect privacy. Consent has been given for use of all observations and stories.

INTRODUCTION: HOLD ME CLOSE: I HURT

Sally played aimlessly in the playground. She moved from one activity to another, sat on the swing briefly, rode a bike a short distance. Each time children came near her she moved away from them. She began digging alone in the sand pit. She made a castle then bashed it down, pounding the sand with her feet. She sat on the edge of the sand pit and looked at the destruction.

A feeling of understanding and togetherness was established.

I moved and sat near her. I put my arm around her and said 'I'm sad your mother died and I won't see your mother again. I liked your mother . She always smiled at me when she came to school'. Sally snuggled close and together we watched the other children play. Then we made a castle together.

Sally's mother had died the previous week after a car accident, this was Sally's first day back at school after the accident. Sally's world had changed, she was confused. If she could have expressed it she would have said 'Hold me close, I hurt'. I let her know that I grieved too and that I would be there for her in this time of grief and loss, change and confusion. Few words were said, however through a simple gesture, a feeling of understanding and togetherness was established.

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF AND LOSS

We live in a world of uncertainty and face continual change. Wars and natural disasters can change our lives forever. Families may face multiple changes including separation, moving and uncertainty of employment. The one certainty in life is death, yet we rarely discuss dying and the grief process which follows. Perhaps we feel it is safer to deny our mortality but the denial of the reality of death may result in ourselves (and our families and our children in particular) being unprepared for this emotionally disruptive experience.

Grief is not only related to death but also to loss of home, school, country, family, friends, pets and significant people in our lives. By exploring and discussing the process of grief we begin to understand the necessity of grief and its significance. Coping strategies can provide both adults and children with ways of support.

Parents have a responsibility to help children understand death and loss. We must as adults confront our own fears and lack of knowledge of the grief process before we are in a position to support children through loss and grieving. It is also important to seek professional help for you and your children when needed.

Definitions

Loss: The actual event of losing something or a person, e.g. through separation or death.

Grief: Describes physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological reactions. Love, anger, fear, frustration, loneliness and guilt are all parts of the grief process.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Bereavement: The period of adjustment to loss—we all experience loss.

We grieve through a period of critical illness, loss of a relationship or lifestyle, and retirement; and after a death, divorce, separation or abortion. Grief is not a sign of weakness or lack of faith. It is an individual response which will vary according to the person, the circumstances of the loss, and past experiences. Each person's grief is unique. In our society people often show grief through emotional, physical, social and cognitive reactions, e.g. crying. But the period of tolerance is short and adults will quickly encourage a person to forget and get on with life.

Spend some time remembering your own reaction to a sudden announcement of the death of a significant person in your life or a major change to your life. Death or a sudden lifestyle change is a significant loss—at the time of death or the announcement of a significant change to a relationship there is a sense of shock.

Immediate reactions may be:

- sudden intake of breath;
- quickening heart beat;
- difficulty breathing, followed by fast breathing;
- dry mouth;
- weak limbs;
- 'fluttering' feeling in the stomach;
- intense crying; and
- feeling of unreality.

Later reactions may be:

- crying;
- changing sleep patterns;
- lack of appetite, often followed by the need to eat at inappropriate times;
- difficulty in making decisions;
- a need to be with someone (talk or be quiet); and
- feeling of numbness, dissociation.

Expression of feelings is a normal and healthy part of the grief process. It is important to accept your grief and give yourself time to think. Delay major decisions. Take care of your health and avoid abuse of alcohol and drugs. Talk about your feelings and pain with a friend.

Expression of feelings is a normal and healthy part of the grief process.

At home

It is very important that family members share, talk about and understand behaviour resulting from severe loss. Include children in discussions. Use clear language at an appropriate level. Children need facts as well as reassurance that they are secure, loved and safe in a changing environment.

Try to keep the home environment as normal as possible.

Follow the same pattern of daily life. Where changes must occur discuss the change with the child.

Will was six years old. He went to junior athletics each Saturday morning. His father always took him to athletics and they went to the shops on the way home each Saturday. Will's father suddenly left the family and moved interstate. Will's mother worked on Saturdays so she arranged for her brother, Pete, to take over the Saturday morning athletics trip. She sat down with Will and said 'Will, Daddy doesn't live with us any more. He lives in a different place so he won't be here to take you to athletics each Saturday. Uncle Pete will take you instead'. Pete was very sensitive to the situation and on the first trip asked Will to indicate where he and his dad had parked the car each Saturday and where his dad had waited. On the way home they went to the hamburger shop.

Pete : 'I like coming to athletics with you and I love hamburgers'

Will: 'My dad likes hamburgers'

Pete: 'You, your dad and me, we all like hamburgers'

Whilst the family was in great turmoil Will's world was kept as normal as possible. Pete and Will's mother gave Will clear facts: his father was no longer there, he could not take Will to athletics. There was another significant adult who could enjoy the trip with Will. Later Will's grandmother helped Will make a story about his Saturday mornings including photos of his father, his uncle, his friends and newspaper cut outs of hamburgers. This part of Will's life remained a happy experience.

PREDICTABLE AND NORMAL REACTIONS OF A CHILD TO LOSS

A child's concept of loss can begin before an actual event.

Parents can use natural events to expose children to first hand experiences. For example, examining a dead bird found on the pathway provides an opportunity to point out the stillness, lack of heartbeat and breathing—the physical aspects of death.

Ben was drawing on his previous experience to understand a new situation.

Children are continually exposed to loss situations: a pet is killed; a friend or teacher moves away; Grandpa dies; the neighbours' car is stolen. Each situation requires a particular strategy, discussion and communication within the family. Each experience builds an understanding of grief and loss as well as developing ways of coping.

The neighbour's car was stolen. Julie, the neighbour, was most distressed when Ben and his mother drove to the car park to collect her. She was stranded without her car. They drove her to the police station to report the robbery. Weeks later Grandma rang to say her car had been stolen. Ben (four years) spoke to her: 'Are you crying Grandma? We will come and pick you up in the car park if you like. Go and tell the policeman'. Ben was drawing on his previous experience to understand a new situation.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Children and adult looking at a dead bird.

An extreme loss is a family crisis

The child is part of the family, and should be included in discussions.

The family home had been burnt down while the family was away. The family sat together at a friend's home discussing where they would live and the items lost in the house fire. John, the father, sat with his arm around Gavin (five years) and helped Gavin remember the toys he had lost in the fire. They talked about new toys they might buy.

John: 'Which toy was your favourite?'

Gavin: 'My teddy bear'

John: 'Well that's the toy we will buy tomorrow, a brand new brown teddy bear just for you'

John included Gavin in the family discussion and recognised the importance of Gavin's toys in his life. The family faced a huge adjustment and many difficulties before settling in a new home, but Gavin coped well. His big sister helped him make a cardboard model of the home which had been lost. Gavin played with it for several weeks.

A young child may not understand that a loss is final

Mark's young sister had been terminally ill for some months. The family had visited the hospital each day. A week after her death Mark (three years) asked his mother ...

Mark: 'Going to the hospital to see Sam?'

Mother: 'No Mark, Sam has died'

Mark: 'No, go hospital, play with Sam'

Mark's limited concepts of time and death did not allow him to understand the finality of death. The situation was upsetting for his mother. A neighbour offered to collect Mark each morning and take him to the park. This outing replaced the pattern of hospital and reduced the stress on his mother.

John, the father, sat with his arm around Gavin (five years) and helped Gavin remember the toys he had lost in the fire.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE LANGUAGE OF GRIEF AND LOSS

The language used at a time of loss often causes confusion to a child. Present a clear explanation of the truth in a clear, sensitive manner. Try to speak to the child in a quiet private place. Sit close to the child and hold the child's hand. Present the facts unadorned by fancy phrases which will perhaps be meaningful, but often beyond the child's comprehension. It is important to be honest. Saying that Nanna has gone on a long trip and will never be back is only going to create stress and confusion for both child and parent.

Kate's grandfather had died during the night. Her mother sat with her the next morning, quietly in the bedroom. She held her hand and said: 'Kate, last night Grandpa died. His heart stopped working. He will not be with us any more. I am sad. I loved him very much and I will miss him.' She hugged Kate.

Some explanations of death confuse the child and create fear and guilt rather than understanding. 'Grandpa died because he was sick' may cause fear and anxiety for the child who develops a cold and is told that they are 'sick'. Using real words can bring the necessary clarity to the situation. Words such as passed away and passing on can be confusing to a child. It is helpful to use language that relates to the child's experience of death. Young children base their understanding on the facts available. This understanding is reinforced by first-hand experiences. A seven-year-old child may understand the phrases 'He does not breathe any more, his heart does not beat' after observing dead animals and birds. A parent can develop this understanding by discussing the lifeless body of a dead bird found in the park or the dead goldfish found in the fish tank.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON GRIEF

All societies pay special attention to important events. Many groups follow traditions associated with loss and grief which are unique to their culture. Parents should be aware of stress that may be caused for a child in the wider environment by cultural demands at a time of grief. The death of a significant person in the child's life can often bring the family members together to celebrate the life of the person providing security for the child. It is important that family customs and reasons for them are explained to the child. Cultural customs and rituals are very important to families and children but we need to make sure that the child's needs are met. Opportunity to play out feelings is one way. Talking about what is happening and why is another.

Valentine playing in the dress-up corner found a black dress, put it on, then began to cry and rub her eyes.

She found a handbag and said 'I am going to the church for the funeral'. She picked up a doll and put it away in the corner. 'You're dead, you died'. She was joined by another child and said 'You want to see my baby? She's dead'. She moved over to the doll. 'You can kiss her, she's dead.' She put cups and saucers on the table, I moved into the area and said 'Do you have a lot of people coming for tea, Valentine?' She nodded her head, 'My baby died and I made a special cake'.

The other child: 'Birthday Cake'

Valentine: 'Cake for my baby'

I said: 'I would like a piece of the special cake, please'

Valentine: 'You came to my house for cake'

I said: 'Yes, your mummy was sad and I was sad because the baby had died'.

The other child laughed: 'It's a birthday, birthday cake'

Valentine: 'No, no my baby's cake'

The other child: 'We go shopping'

Valentine: 'I stay home'

I had visited Valentine's home soon after the death of her baby brother. Her mother was dressed in black, she offered me some special cake made to mark her baby's death. She would not leave the house for three months. Other relatives were delivering Valentine to school.

Use language appropriate to the child's level of development.

DEATH

Children are exposed to images of death through TV and films, yet the word 'death' remains taboo in everyday conversation. Most adults include children in discussion of the birth process. However, few discuss death with children, even though it is just as natural a process. An adult close to a child should tell the child immediately about a family death, using language appropriate to the child's level of development.

Include:

- the fact of the death;
- a clear statement concerning the reality of death;
- information about the cause and circumstances of death; and
- expression of your feelings about the loss.

'Grandpa died last night. He was at his house when he died. Tomorrow there will be a special service at the church so we can all remember Grandpa. We will take some flowers from our garden. I am feeling sad—I loved him very much.'

It is important that the child is given physical reassurance of your love, such as a hug and holding hands, as you relay the news. Remember the young child's world is the present and based very much on the child's own needs. You may expect the child to react with grief after news of a death. The child may quickly move into their own immediate world—but later return to the loss.

Jane was told of her grandmother's death. Her mother gave her a hug.

Jane (four years): 'Can I go out to play now?'

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A child's grief differs from that of an adult in that the child's world is in the here-and-now. The outward signs of sadness may be short lived or intermittent. The adult is able to share the child's world of loss by being prepared to listen, observe, play and support creative work. Children have their own way of explaining the death of someone special. Play will be used by the child as a tool to develop understanding.

Predictable and normal reactions of a child to a loss through death

Children under two years:

- are aware of separation and feelings of loss;
- respond to cuddling and talking about familiar things;
- react to mood changes of parents;
- need adults to communicate warmth and love;
- do not require detailed explanations; and
- need to feel security through familiar patterns.

Jane (18 months) had disturbed sleep patterns. Her father had died several months before. Jane's mother was distressed and having trouble coping with family life. Jane's grandmother came to live in the household and established a pattern of family activities with meals on time and regular visits to the park. She cuddled Jane a lot, read her stories and played with her. Slowly the mother was able to cope with family life again. Jane began to feel secure and her sleep patterns returned to normal.

Preschoolers (two to four years):

- understand death as temporary—children of this age cannot understand finality;
- see the world in the here and now;
- may feel insecure and need an adult close to them;
- need repeated assurances that their world will remain relatively unchanged;
- need a clear, honest, factual explanation of the death; and
- respond well to opportunities for creative expression.

Emma's uncle had died. He usually picked her up from child care each day. She needed continual reassurance that someone would collect her at the end of each day. She was given a photo of her grandmother to keep in her bag. Her grandmother collected her each day.

Children six to nine years:

- understand death is final;
- require more information about the death and funeral, want to know who will be at the funeral and about the funeral procession, or other details;
- respond to use of creative outlets such as making a drawing to include in the order of service for the funeral;
- have a wider support mechanism (e.g. teachers, friends and neighbourhood people);
- can take part in family discussions—it is family members who can provide clear information and details to the child; and
- put high importance on ritual.

It was suggested he make a special drawing to put on the coffin from the family.

The family were discussing Grandma's funeral service. Paul (nine years) asked continual questions. It was suggested he make a special drawing to put on the coffin from the family. Paul spent the next day making a drawing about grandma and the family. During the service he placed it on the coffin. In later months he made a book of beautiful drawings about Grandma and her life. The family treasured it.

Children nine to twelve years:

- have an understanding of death;
- are interested in biological information;
- need to feel secure and may need assurance that they are not alone;
- are ready to assume roles;
- need honest answers to questions;
- may be angry or feel guilty; and
- need to be included in decision making.

Isabella (11 years) became worried about her health after her aunt's death from anorexia. She asked questions about her aunt's illness, symptoms and diet. Her mother suggested that she help plan the family meals to ensure the family ate well. She needed continual reassurance that she was eating well. She often appeared angry and made comments such as 'she should have eaten better and not died'. Isabella and her aunt had been close friends. She had lost a friend and companion as well as an aunt. She was worried that she may also die. It was important that the parents kept open lines of communication to enable Isabella to discuss her fears.

Whatever the age, make sure that the child knows that people around them are sad but that people feel better after they cry. Children also need to be made aware that while everyone is going through a tough time, the adults will always be there to look after them and support them.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

WHEN A SIBLING DIES

This is a time of extreme family crisis. Parents feel helpless and distressed. Other children in the family are often afraid that they too might die. They are coping with the loss of a brother or sister as well as changes in the behaviour of parents and the child will sometimes try to replace the dead sibling by changing behaviour. This behaviour may unconsciously be encouraged by parents who miss the dead child and find comfort in similar behaviours. Surviving children may feel guilty, especially if they remember sibling fights. They have lost a playmate and friends they loved, also a person who was a rival in the family. If the sibling has been ill for a long period the surviving child may have received limited attention and may now demand it. Parents need to reassure children that they do not suffer the same disease which caused the sibling's death, that they are healthy and strong. Parents need to be patient and loving. While the remaining children are individual and will never replace the child who died, the family is still there and the remaining children are part of the family. Communication within the family is vital. Parents should share memories and feelings.

Sue, the mother, stopped as she packed the school lunches. She realised she was automatically packing a lunch for her son who had died accidentally several weeks before. She began to cry.

Max (six years): 'Why are you crying Mum?'

Sue: 'I miss Peter so much, it hurts inside'

Max (coming close to her): 'I hurt inside too'

They hugged each other. Later the family talked about Sue's grief at seeing the lunch box. It was decided the box would become the treats box as Peter had loved a treat. Each week while shopping Sue would buy a treat to put in the box—sweets or chocolate. As the family shared the treat they would usually begin to talk about happy times with Peter. This solution acknowledged both Sue and Max's grief and also provided the family with a way of remembering happy times with Peter.

Kenneth's big brother had been killed driving to work. Several months later Kenneth (five years) was playing with several other children using the toy petrol pump. A child rode a bike to the pump.

Kenneth: You want petrol (pretended to put petrol on the bike).

Child began to ride away on the bike.

Kenneth: 'Go to work now'

The child rode away. Kenneth ran after the bike and pushed it so that the bike and child crashed off the path. As a teacher moved over to the scene Kenneth said, 'He died'. Kenneth was obviously playing out a scene he had heard described by his family concerning his brother's death.

Children will often use drawing and painting to work through aspects of a crisis. Parents can assist by providing suitable materials for the child to use and by working with the child.

Fiona (five years) painted a figure of a person. The person had a smile. The painting was colourful.

Adult: 'That person looks happy'

Fiona: 'That's Kate'

She looked at the painting briefly then covered the figure with black paint, 'Gone now'. Kate, her big sister, had died three months before.

A father was sitting with his son (four years). It was five months since his twin brother had died in an accident. They were making a book about the boys playing together including photos of the two boys playing football and swimming. They began to draw pictures. The son drew a figure by itself.

Father: 'Is that you?'

The son nodded his head.

Father: 'What are you doing?'

Son: 'I want to play ball'

The father drew a picture of himself and the remaining son playing ball.

Father: 'We can play ball together'

The picture was added to the book. The death of a twin is a significant loss to a child and needs to be handled sensitively. The twin can never be replaced by another person, however the child can gently be shown that other people can be companions.

DEATH OF A SIGNIFICANT ADULT

All children have significant people who influence their lives. They develop a special relationship and love for such people. Grandparents are such people.

Grandparents usually have time to listen to young children, deliver and collect children from school, care for children while parents are ill, away or at work. The death of a grandparent can leave the child grieving for a special relationship. It is important to assist the child to remember characteristics of the grandparent.

Some ways to do this are to:

- make a collection of drawings and photos about the grandparent;
- remember their birthday and celebrate their life;
- plant a special garden;
- make a special shelf of books the grandparent enjoyed reading to the child and continue to read them together;
- seek out an adopt-a-grandparent program. You will not be replacing the grandparent. You will be establishing a new bond between the child and another adult.

Joe (four years) was sad. His grandmother had died. She had spent a great deal of time with him, reading stories and playing games. They used to garden together and visit the local nursery. Joe continually asked if grandma was coming back. An uncle began to spend time with Joe. They began to make a special garden and called it 'Granny Barbara's Garden'. Neighbours gave them plants and the local nursery, where grandma had purchased plants, donated some plants and gave Joe a special trowel. The uncle borrowed some children's gardening books and read them to Joe. Together they planned what to plant. Joe very proudly showed visitors the garden, 'my granny died but this is her garden.' The memory of happy times stayed with Joe and he established a new relationship with another significant adult.

An uncle began to spend time with Joe. They began to make a special garden and called it 'Granny Barbara's Garden'.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

SUICIDE

Suicide is often even more difficult to explain to children and when someone close commits suicide many adults feel that they don't know how to tell children what the real cause of death is. But, once again, it is important to be honest with children from the beginning. There are a number of reasons why telling children the truth about suicide is important. If not, children may overhear from friends or neighbours and may feel betrayed. They may have trouble grieving without knowing the true nature of death and, if lied to by their parents, may have trouble developing trust.

However, adults often find it extremely difficult to speak to children about suicide and are not sure what sort of language to use. It is important to realise that children may have trouble understanding the concept and that they may need the concept of suicide explained to them. Find out what they already know about it and use your judgement in breaking the news. One way may be to say something like that the person 'made their body stop working' or that they killed themselves (commit suicide is a term children may not understand).

It is also very important to explain to children that it is not their fault and, while this seems obvious, it is important to repeat that children are not responsible so they will not worry. Parents also might worry that children will copy suicidal behaviour so it is important to make sure that all of the children's feelings are out in the open, as well as giving them opportunity to speak with other adults who can help. When adults tell their children the truth about suicide they often experience a great sense of relief because keeping the secret of suicide is often very stressful to a family trying to cope.

LOSS OF A PET

The loss of a pet can be a traumatic experience for a child. Never trivialise a pet's death. If a pet's death is imminent (e.g. an aged or ill animal):

- discuss the possible death and the reasons;
- allow the child time to say goodbye;
- explain the death in simple, factual language;
- involve the child in the burial of the pet;
- encourage the child to remember positive, happy times with the pet;
- acknowledge sadness that the pet is no longer part of the family;
- allow time before replacing the pet; and
- later make a book with the child, including pictures of the pet.

Erin's pet mouse died. Erin (four years) was upset. Her mother sat with her and talked about the fun times they had spent with the mouse. They both said goodbye to the mouse, put it in a small box and went into the garden to choose a spot to bury the mouse. Her mother said a prayer and they found flowers to put on the grave. When Erin's father came home he helped Erin make a cross.

The loss of a pet may be because of family break up and the family's need to move house, move into a flat or through illness. It is important that the child understands the reasons for giving up the pet and is involved in finding a new home for the pet.

Later the director of nursing wrote to Aaron and sent a photo of the cat and some elderly residents. Aaron was given a fish tank and goldfish.

Aaron began to develop asthma. Allergy tests proved the cat's fur was causing an allergy reaction in Aaron. The doctor advised that a new home be found for the family cat. Aaron's father contacted the local nursing home and offered the cat as a companion to the patients. Aaron and his parents visited the home and met some of the residents. The cat was settled at the home. Later the director of nursing wrote to Aaron and sent a photo of the cat and some elderly residents. Aaron was given a fish tank and goldfish.

CHANGING LIFESTYLES: MOVING HOUSE/SCHOOL

We need to view a move for the child in the context of the child's life span. Often a child moves from all that is familiar, from the only place he/she has known. A move to a new home can mean loss of friends, the security of a familiar place, favourite parks. On the other hand it may mean a move from unpleasant memories and to a more secure and happy environment.

Remember to:

- discuss the move with the child;
- take pictures of the old home and the new home with you;
- take pieces of furniture, plants or known items to the new house where possible;
- toys are very important to children, so make sure the favourite toys are with the child, perhaps in a special case;
- be prepared for the child to be cautious of the new environment; and
- use drawing, painting, use of blocks and other construction toys to help the child remember special places.

Lucy's family were moving to live overseas. Lucy had lived in the same house all her life. She was five years old and had recently started school. Her best friend was in her class at school. The family discussed the new job and the new country where they would live. Lucy helped make a display on a cardboard sheet about the country she would soon move to with her family. Pictures were taken of Lucy with her teacher and school mates. When Lucy attended her new school the teacher offered

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

to e-mail the previous school and send a message to the previous teacher. A learning experience developed between both schools. Lucy was given a special toy bag by her grandmother to keep her toys to play with on the trip. It had a label the same as the other luggage. Photos were taken of the house including Lucy's bedroom. These were made into a book called 'my house in Australia'. Lucy settled well into her new home and school. Communication and inclusion were the key points to the successful move. Lucy was included in decisions about the move and was left with visual prompts of her previous home and school. Through the use of modern technology, Australia was not so far away.

For some children a move is more traumatic and steps need to be taken to repair the damage and address the child's concerns and fears.

Kim (six years) was a disruptive and aggressive child at school. He appeared angry and staff had requested assistance in controlling him. He had attended the school for one month and little was known of his background except that he had come from interstate. A counsellor working with him drew a picture of her house with doors and windows, a garden and a dog. Kim began to draw and drew a big window.

Counsellor: 'That's a big window'

Kim: 'It was little for Mummy to climb through'

Eventually the story of Kim and his mother fleeing from a difficult family situation through a window and a bus trip interstate unfolded through the use of pictures and stories. Kim talked about a rabbit he had left behind. He drew the rabbit in a hutch

and was obviously concerned for its welfare. With the consent of his mother his previous school was contacted. Kim was minding the school rabbit over the weekend at the time that he and his mother left abruptly. He did not know what had happened to the rabbit. The previous teacher confirmed that the rabbit had been retrieved from Kim's father and was healthy and happy. Pictures of the rabbit and Kim's school were e-mailed to his new school and printed as part of a book about Kim and the rabbit. Kim settled into his new school and home. The principal gave him the job of feeding the school's fish. His book was read out to the class and he was given a merit certificate at assembly for his writing and illustrations. Kim's mother was assisted to support Kim through his transition to a new life interstate. Kim became a cooperative member of class, but still needed time to adjust and was always wary of sudden changes.

SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

Definitions

Separation: The act or effect of separating. The process of accepting the lost relationship as a reality begins. It is necessary to adjust to an environment minus a significant person, e.g. partner or parent.

Divorce: The legal dissolution of marriage which involves complete separation. The process of redirecting energy and time into new directions begins.

Australia has a clear framework for joint parental responsibility in relation to child support. Counselling is available concerning access and custody of children involved in separations and divorce. Research indicates that it is not the divorce that dramatically affects children but the emotional upheaval of conflict, economic changes, family lifestyle changes and loss of significant people to the child's world.

Marriage or relationship breakdown is a process, not an event. The grief of the loss is extended over a long period: weeks, months and even years. Grief is often experienced before the actual separation because of tension in the home, fighting, periods of absence of one parent, and the change of pattern of family life. Some children feel they are to blame, e.g. imagine it was their behaviour which caused the parent's departure. Children may feel anger towards one or both parents. Emotions are similar to those of a family experiencing loss through death. Parents are often confused and upset. Sensitive communication and consideration of the child's needs will enable the child to grieve for the absent parent and changed lifestyles, and to adjust to the new situation. Many children flourish in one-parent households.

Important points following a separation:

- Allow time for the whole family to work through the crisis.
- Allow time for adjustment to changes.
- Involve children in decision making.
- Give a simple, honest explanation for the family breakup.
- Both parents should give reassurances of love and continued parenting.
- Use neutral ground for discussion of the child's future.

Riley's father had left the family home after many arguments. Riley (four years) had been told 'Daddy has gone, he will never come back'. Riley became angry with his mother and often cried. He would scream 'I want my daddy'. With the assistance of a counsellor the mother, father and Riley were brought together. There was an agreement that the meeting was solely to discuss the child's reaction to the separation. Riley sat close to his father. There was an agreement to explain the reason why they could not live together. Both told Riley of their love for him. Riley was asked if he would like to spend time with his father. Times were agreed. Riley slowly adjusted to the new arrangements. Neutral ground was required to enable the parents to focus on reasons for Riley's reactions to the separation.

Parents are the most important people in a child's life. Parents love and care for their children; however in the anger of a separation children are sometimes used as pawns in the game against the other parent. The child may be placed in the position of having to provide love and care for the adult shocked by a marital break up. This care often demands emotional maturity far beyond the child's stage of development. The child is sometimes expected to choose between the two people he/she loves the most.

Adults usually pass through stages of change and children are part of each stage.

The stages of change that usually follow a separation are as follows:

Parents are the most important people in a child's life

The denial stage

- People experience shock and despair.
- The adult withdraws from reality.
- Life continues on 'automatic pilot'.
- Parent seems removed from the child.
- Children may be insecure and withdrawn or aggressive.

Ruth (three years) was collected late from preschool for the second time in a week. She was most distressed. When her mother arrived she apologised and said 'I seem to have lost all concept of time'. Her 10 year relationship had broken up several months before.

The critical stage

- Strong feelings of anger, abandonment and guilt.
- Children often used as a sounding board by each partner.
- Children may be confused if communication is limited.

Sal's mother was angry with the car repair man. Sal was confused and frightened as her mother was so angry. Sal's father had normally taken the car for repairs. Sal's mother screamed as she got in the car 'It's not fair—I shouldn't have to do this'. Sal began to cry in the back seat. Sal's world had changed since her father had left the home. Her mother was overworked and stressed. Sal was confused.

Identity stage

- Parent may wish to 'payback' the spouse.
- Parents may alter their appearance.
- There may be financial pressures.
- Legal proceedings may be stressful.
- Final divorce is an anti-climax.
- Children are under stress.
- There is a need for clear communication between child and parents.

Johnny's mother had moved away from the family and divorce proceedings were in progress. His father had dyed his hair and changed his style of clothing. He drove a bright sports car. Johnny (five years) made a painting at school of a person in bright colours. 'That's my dad, he's a different dad'. Johnny was trying to make sense of his changing world.

The mourning stage

- The child needs to be informed about changes to family lifestyle.
- Explain facts in simple, clear language.
- Involve the whole family in decision making.
- Time is needed to acknowledge the death of the relationship.

The divorce of Beth's parents was finalised. Beth's mother arranged a party to celebrate her new life. Beth (six years) wanted her paternal grandma to come to the party. Beth's mother explained that Grandma was daddy's mother and that she wasn't married to Daddy any longer. Beth said 'But she's my Grandma'. Beth's mother realised that for Beth's sake she needed to reestablish contact with her mother-in-law. She rang her mother-in-law and explained how she was feeling. The grandmother welcomed her call and said she had missed contact with Beth and suggested that Beth might like to visit her for the weekend. Beth needed contact with this significant adult. The adult likewise needed contact with Beth. The mother was able to make the arrangements because she had given herself time to grieve for the breakdown in her relationship. It was time for the family to move on with life.

Predictable and normal behaviours in children experiencing the separation of a family

The child two years and under may:

- appear insecure;
- display disturbed sleep patterns; and
- develop strong dependence on the custodial parent.

Remember that the child's concept of time is limited. Long periods of access with the other parent may cause fretting. For a baby even short periods of absence from main carer may be too long.

The child three to four years may:

- display distress by crying, whingeing and aggression;
- regress in language development, toilet and sleep patterns;
- be sad; and
- be aggressive or menacing through play.

The child needs firm, fair and constant discipline. Creative play such as dress ups, painting , drawing and clay will be useful.

The child four to six years may:

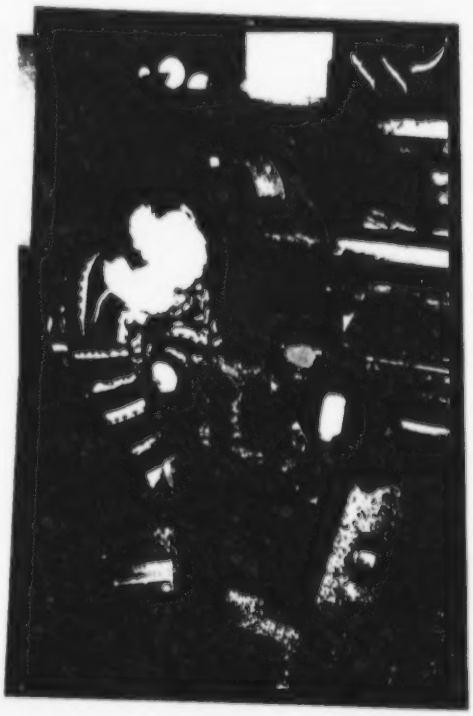
- display distress, anger, aggression or demanding behaviour;
- require repeated assurances of love and security;
- fantasise that the family is back together; and
- appear more mature and ready to assume responsibility.

Parents should remind themselves that children of this age are still very young even though they appear mature. Avoid the tendency to give too much responsibility to this age group.

The child six to twelve may:

- be aggressive, moody, restless or dreamy;
- turn to another significant adult for comfort and friendship e.g. teacher;
- begin to talk about feelings; and
- wish parents could get back together.

Communication is very important between adult and child. Adult needs to model sharing of feelings.



Most importantly:

- the child has a right to love, respect and know both parents;
- many single parents provide a stable happy environment for children;
- a separation does not necessarily mean difficulties will arise; and
- communication between parents and children is the key to surviving separation.

Telling the child about the separation and divorce

It is vital that the child is told about the separation as soon as the breakup occurs. If possible both parents should be present. The child should be reassured of the parents love. If only one parent is present when the child is told of the separation it is advisable to have another adult present. The other parent should be informed of the details given to the child. While respecting family privacy it is advisable to explain the facts of the situation to another significant adult in the child's life e g. teacher.

DISPLACED AND REFUGEE CHILDREN

Refugee and displaced children need particular support to make sense of their changing world. Parents can assist by giving the child the time and means to work through fears, anxiety and unpleasant memories.

An adult moved quietly to the two children and put an arm around each child in a brief moment of protection and understanding of their previous experiences.

Two refugee children, Anna (three years) and Carlos (five years) were building with blocks and made a complicated tall building. Model people were put inside the building. Carlos picked up a large box and circled the building making loud plane noises. He dropped the block over the middle of the building. The building collapsed. Anna immediately curled up in a ball with her arms over her head. She remembered repeated bombing raids in her homeland. An adult moved quietly to the two children and put an arm around each child in a brief moment of protection and understanding of their previous experiences. The children needed to express fear of previous experiences. The use of block building provided an opportunity for this. The adult acknowledged their hurt and painful memories and quietly gave them opportunities to work through anxieties.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS

Additional demands are placed on parents at a time of crisis. It is essential that parents have discussed common areas of concern. It is useful to work through the following points:

1. Recognise your own feelings. Emotions associated with your own experiences involving major loss or change will surface at another time of crisis. Do not deny these feelings. Talk with a trusted friend, your partner, a colleague, family member or a counsellor.

2. Ensure that parents and children drink plenty of water. When grieving we are crying much more, and may become dehydrated.

3. Explain clearly what has happened. Communication is all important. Sit quietly with the child and explain what has happened. Explain the circumstances of a death or the fact that the family is separating. Use simple language appropriate to the child's age. Taking into consideration family privacy, inform the child's preschool/school/care centre of any circumstances which may affect the child's behaviour or change to adults responsible for the child. If there are restrictions on access to the child by one parent, provide the necessary documentation to authorise this restriction. If other adults close to the child offer assistance, accept it graciously.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

4. Monitor vulnerable family members. Some people find times of crisis particularly stressful. Watch for the signs of distress and stress. Repeatedly tell the child that you love them and try to keep to the pattern of family life as normal as possible.

5. Address fears and fantasies. Listen to your children and reassure them that they are secure.

6. Rituals are important. Consider the family's culture and provide ways for the child to cope with the loss by taking part in the funeral service, making a special garden, burying a pet, making a book about the home to be left behind when the family moves. Afterwards assist the child to move on with happy and positive memories.

7. Provide a safe place to grieve. Let the child know that displays of emotion are acceptable by being a role model yourself. Make sure each family member has a quiet place (own bedroom or a spot in the garden) to sit quietly.

8. Plan special family times. Plan times when the family can be together to share thoughts, memories and each others company. The family unit is the most secure place for the child.

Parents need to be:

- **aware:** that grief is normal.
- **there:** the child needs consistency of relationships.

- **sensitive:** to the moods within the family
- **ready:** be prepared for crisis, recognise your own grief and coping strategies, be ready to listen to those who grieve.
- **patient:** the process of grief takes time.
- **confident:** in your own ability to provide a loving secure environment for your child.

Where to get help

Prolonged intense emotion or obsessional thought or behaviour that makes it difficult to function; continued fears or anxieties about your wellbeing; or thoughts of self-harm may be indications that professional help is needed. If you or your children are having trouble coping, consult a trained psychologist, social worker or mental health professional.

Possible contacts

The National Association for Loss and Grief has links and information. www.nalag.org.au, info@nalag.org.au, (02) 6882 9222.

The Centre for Grief Education has information and also provides a free bereavement counselling service for adults. www.grief.org.au, info@grief.org.au, (03) 9545 6277.

Griefline is a 15 hour, 7 days a week, loss and grief anonymous telephone counselling service open from 12 noon to 3am each day. (03) 9396 7799.

Care Ring (previously Crisis Line) is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and also has two other help lines, Mensline for men having trouble dealing with marriage breakdown and the Suicide Help Line which is for people contemplating suicide and bereaved families. www.carering.org.au, enquiries@carering.org.au, 136 169.

Lifeline is an enormous operation with 41 centres across Australia and provides telephone counselling for hundreds of thousands of Australians each year. www.lifeline.org.au, 13 11 14.

Kids Help Line has both telephone and online services 24 hours a day for children and young people. www.kidshelp.com.au, 1800 55 1800.

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

Dumbleton, M. (2002). Passing On. Random House.

Buscaglia, L. (1982). The fall of Freddie the leaf. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Harris, A. (1955). Why did he die? Minneapolis: Learner Publishing Company.

Kirkwood, N. A. A child's questions about death. The Baptist Chaplaincy Care Service.

Leavy, U. (1996). Goodbye Poppa. New York: Orchard Books.

McDonald, G. (1992). Lemmie the leaf. Access Press.

Smith, D. (1978). A taste of blackberries. New York: Croswell & Puffin.

Viorst (1971). The tenth good thing about Barney. New York: Athenaeum.

Walker, A. (1991). To hell with dying. Hodden & Stoughton.

White, E. B. (1952). Charlotte's web. Harper & Row.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Banks, G. (1994). Helping your child through separation and divorce. Melbourne: Collins Dove.

Berger, S. (1983). Divorce without victims: Helping children through divorce with a minimum of pain and trauma. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Buckman, R. (1988). Don't know what to say. Cornwell: Hartnolls Ltd.

Burrett, J. F. (1988). Child access and modern family law. Sydney: The Law Book Company.

Fishel, E. (1991). 'I swore I'd never do that': Recognising family patterns and making wise parenting choices. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press.

Fox, S. S. Good grief: Helping groups of children when a friend dies. The New England Assoc.

Grollman, E. A. (1990). Talking about death: A dialogue between parent and child. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hawkes, V., Pawsey, M., & Stepherdson, J. (1988). Birth, death and marriage in a multicultural Australia. Melbourne: Collins Dove.

Nieberg, H. A., & Fischer, A. (1996). Pet loss. New York: Harper Collins Books.

Virtue, D. (1989). My kids don't live with me anymore. Minneapolis: Compcare Publishers.

Australian Early
Childhood Association Inc.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Research in Practice Series (RIPS)
Subscribers to this series receive four books per year. RIPS aim to provide practical support to workers in all early childhood settings. The books bring together the best information available on a wide range of topics and are an ideal resource for practitioners and students. Books produced in previous years have become standard texts in many early childhood courses.

Every Child magazine
Every Child magazine is published four times a year especially for educators, carers and parents of children from birth to eight years of age. It provides news and features of interest to everyone working with, and interested in, the education, care and development of young children.

Australian Journal of Early Childhood
This quarterly journal features up-to-date articles designed to impart new information and encourage the critical exchange of ideas among practitioners in the early childhood field. AJEC gives the field an indispensable Australian perspective on issues of concern and interest.

AECA Membership
The Australian Early Childhood Association has branches in every state/territory. All members receive Every Child and comprehensive members also receive subscriptions to the Research in Practice Series and the Australian Journal of Early Childhood.

Members participate in the identification of priorities for state and national action, and influence policies concerning young children through publications, conferences and policy development.

Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
PO Box 105 Watson ACT 2602
Tel: (02) 6241 6900 Fax: (02) 6241 5547
Sales line (toll free): 1800 356 900
Email: national@aeca.org.au

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Helping children in times of need: Grief, loss, separation and divorce

A handbook for parents assisting children through grief and loss

The world is sometimes a difficult place to explain to children. The death of a family member or sibling, by accident, illness or suicide can be very traumatic and confusing, especially for children. The death of a pet, marriage break-ups and even moving house can also be very stressful and difficult for all concerned. In this book, Judith Parker, a trained grief and loss counsellor and best-selling AECA author, gives useful advice on how to talk to children about difficult events. *Helping children in times of need* also lists normal grief reaction in children from birth to twelve years, books for you and your children to read and information on where to get professional help should you need it.

ISBN 1-875890-62-9

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

[X] This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

[ ] This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").

PS031439